

NEPENTHES PALAWANENSIS:

ANOTHER NEW SPECIES OF GIANT PITCHER PLANT FROM THE PHILIPPINES

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Following the discovery of *Nepenthes attenboroughii* on Mount Victoria, I returned to Palawan in January 2010 to explore another mountain called Sultan Peak with a Filipino botanist friend. As mentioned in my article on *Nepenthes attenboroughii* one year ago, the Philippine island of Palawan is of extreme botanical interest because it is a hotspot of diversity located close to the great island of Borneo, but it has remained relatively little explored, especially in terms of carnivorous plants.

After spending one week to receive permission from the provincial mayor and local authorities, I was fortunate to travel to the base of Sultan Peak and begin a climb to the summit of the mountain. Sultan Peak is located nearby Mount Victoria, but is separated by a large valley several kilometers broad. The summit is of a comparable altitude but it is ecologically isolated and so a possible home for distinct, but related highland *Nepenthes* flora. I arrived at the base of Sultan Peak on January 17th, having previously found and engaged three hunters who would act as guides, and purchased food and provisions. The guides live in a wooden shack near to the base of Sultan Peak, however repeatedly said that, to the best of their knowledge, no person had previously climbed to the summit of the mountain. They agreed to help me climb as far up the unknown slopes as possible, but repeatedly exclaimed that they did not know whether the summit was within reach.

Our little group left on January 18th, and trekking through the lowlands we passed several hunting parties searching for pigs. Each hunting group had long wooden spears with sharpened metal points and hunting dogs. The climb up Sultan Peak was not difficult and a path existed for several kilometers up the lower slopes, but swiftly evaporated in the mayhem of rainforest vegetation. We



Figure 1: Stewart McPherson enjoying large *Nepenthes palwanensis* pitchers, Sultan Peak, Palawan, Philippines.

could proceed only by machetteing a path forward or by following the courses of streams. After two days trekking, we reached a ledge close to a 30-m waterfall and beheld a glorious view of Mount Victoria in the distance. This was as far as the guides had been before, and since the waterfall was nameless, we decided to call it Sultan Falls. Two of the guides looked ahead for the best direction to continue, while I helped establish our camp for the night.

The following morning we continued our climb, scrambling up a steep water course and climbing up several abrupt, near vertical ledges. After several hours we passed through bamboo forest, then upper montane scrub, and then finally we reached the summit of a ridge line a few hundred metres below the mountain top. Exactly as on Mount Victoria, as I stepped out from the bushes and small trees into open montane heath, the abrupt vegetation change brought a population of a magnificent giant *Nepenthes* plants. After studying the *Nepenthes* for a few minutes, it was apparent that the find represented a new species, although one very closely related to *N. attenboroughii*.

The *Nepenthes* of Sultan Peak bore spectacular ovate, reddish pitchers lined with short hairs (see Back Cover). The traps are truly gigantic, I found several pitchers exceeding 35 cm in length, and so large that I could place my entire hand and part of my forearm inside the great traps (see Figure 1). Interestingly, all of the pitchers I observed were lower ones. Many highland *Nepenthes* of the Philippines are known to only produce lower pitchers (e.g. *N. hamiguitanensis*), however, this trait in this new taxon was in stark contrast to *N. attenboroughii*, which produces upper pitchers from a very early age, and all mature plants consist entirely of upper traps. Other subtle differences could be identified in the leaf structure, pitcher lid, and various other characteristics.

Continued exploration of the summit of Sultan Peak revealed that all populations of the *Nepenthes* occurred in direct sunlight amongst windswept, stunted, upper montane shrubs and scrub 1 m tall or so. Most of the aged, mature plants had formed a rigid, upright or scrambling stem up to 1.5 m long and had a growing habit almost identical to *N. attenboroughii*. With no water source on the summit, and no rivers visible on the upper slopes, we were forced to begin our descent in the early afternoon and began trekking down the ridge top, past the scars of gigantic landslides. The following day, we returned back to civilisation, and shared all our findings with friends at the Palawan State University. We jointly decided that the plant would be named *Nepenthes palawanensis*, since its pitchers are larger than *N. attenboroughii* and all other *Nepenthes* of Palawan, and so a fitting tribute to that beautiful Philippine isle.

An extensive account of the morphology of *Nepenthes palawanensis* is presented in Stewart McPherson's new, two volume work *Carnivorous Plants and their Habitats*, which examines all carnivorous plant genera in the wild (see www.redfernnaturalhistory.com for more information and also for videos and photos of *Nepenthes palawanensis*).

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